

## Overview of English Grammar, by Paul Black, 14 March 2007

### 1. A **sentence** consists of one or more clauses.

A simple sentence consists of a single clause: e.g. *I saw him*.

Sentences can also consist of two or more clauses joined by **conjunctions**:

e.g. *I saw him and he saw me*. or *When I saw him, he saw me*.

(the conjunctions *and* and *or* can also come between noun phrases (e.g. *this or that*) or between adjectives (e.g. *fat and sassy*).

### 2. A **clause** must contain a verb. The shortest clauses consist only of a verb, e.g. *Jump!*

### 3. Most **verbs** (generally main verbs) have different forms for present tense (e.g. *jump* and *(he/she/it) jumps*) and past tense (*jumped*) and many can also take *-ing* (as in *(I am) jumping*).

The main verb is sometimes preceded by one or more **auxiliary** (or “helper”) verbs, which include forms of *be* (i.e. *is, am, are, was* or *were*, as e.g. *(I) am jumping*),

forms of *have* (i.e. *have, has, had*, e.g. *(I) have jumped*),

and such **modal auxiliaries** as *can, could, may, might, will, would, and shall, should*.

### 4. Most clauses also contain from one to three “**participants**” (or **noun phrases**).

In most clauses one participant is the **subject**, typically the one who does the action of the verb (if it’s an action), e.g. *I saw him*. or *The big dog chased the little mouse*.

Usually only imperative clauses (or commands) lack a subject: e.g. *Jump!* or *Do it!*

(These clauses are sometimes said to have the subject ‘you’ as being ‘understood’.)

When a clause contains a second participant it’s usually an **object**:

*I saw him*. or *The big dog chased the little mouse*.

If there is a third participant it is an **indirect object**, e.g. *I gave her a present*.

### 5. **Noun phrases** (or participants) tell who or what. They often consist of more than one word, but they can be one word if that word is:

(a) a **pronoun**, e.g. *I saw him*, or *This is something*.

(**personal pronouns** include *I, me, mine, you, yours, he, him, his, she, her, hers, it, its, we, us, ours, they, them, theirs*; **demonstrative pronouns** include *this, that, these, those*; **interrogative pronouns** include *what, who*; **indefinite pronouns** include words like *anyone* and *somebody*)

(b) a **proper noun** (e.g. a person’s name) e.g. *Jane is visiting Tom*,

(c) a **plural noun** (e.g. *Pigs can fly*.) or an **uncountable noun** (e.g. *Gossip spreads*.)

Most longer noun phrases contain some sort of a **noun** (the name of a thing or concept), usually preceded by a **determiner** (an **article** *a, an* or *the*; a **demonstrative** *this, that, these, those*; a **quantifier** such as *some* or *all*; or a possessive pronoun *my, your, his, her, its, our, or their*): e.g. *my house*, or *this class*, or *all children*, or *your idea*.

Noun phrases can also contain one or more **adjectives** (Derewianka groups these together with determiners as ‘adjectivals’), which come before the noun and after any determiner: e.g. *a big day*, or *those terrible young girls*, or *your friendly local agent*.

Adjectives can be ‘modified’ or ‘qualified’ by certain types of **adverbs**, as in *very big*, *extremely tall*, *slightly pale*.

Noun phrases can also contain **prepositional phrases** that tell more about the noun, e.g. where it is (e.g. *the house in the country*) or what it’s like (e.g. *the man in the grey suit*).

A preposition phrase is a noun phrase preceded by a **preposition**, e.g. words like *of, in, on, at, over, under, after, before, to, from, near, through,...*

Noun phrases can also contain **relative clauses** after the noun, e.g. *the man (that) I saw yesterday*, or *the time when I met her*. Recall that *that* and *when* are conjunctions.

### 6. Clauses can also contain ‘**circumstances**’ (or **adverbials** or **adverbial phrases**), which generally tell when, where, or how.

If a circumstance consists of a single word, it is an **adverb**; e.g. *She’ll go today*. or *She’ll go there*, or *She’ll go quickly*. (Many adverbs end in *-ly*.)

Longer circumstances are made up of a noun phrase preceded by a **preposition**: e.g. *(I’ll go) in the morning*, or *(I’ll go) to the big city*, or *(I’ll go) with quiet footsteps*. Note that they are only circumstances when used with verbs, such as *go* in this case.

Note that prepositions are only prepositions when used before a noun phrase, e.g. *under the bridge*. Some of the same words can be used as adverbs, e.g. *he went under*.